

# 5

## Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

### Fastrack Revision

#### Master Card

- ▶ The poem portrays an image of a wife dismayed with her married life.
- ▶ Aunt Jennifer is an abused wife unable to escape her husband's brutality.
- ▶ The poem focuses on Aunt Jennifer's dreams and the harsh world—she calls her reality.
- ▶ She escapes her harsh world through her stitching and needle-point, and the tigers that she create are everything that she is not.
- ▶ The poet uses comparison to convey the difference between Aunt Jennifer and her tigers.
- ▶ Women who are dominated by their husbands live their lives in a state of mental confinement.
- ▶ Aunt Jennifer wishes to lead through artistic creations as she is trapped in an abusive marriage.
- ▶ Her tapestries portray her inner feelings conveying the constant terror she is living in.
- ▶ The only way for Aunt Jennifer to escape the expectations of her husband is to live on, after death through her artwork.
- ▶ *Adrienne Rich* reveals, through the simple lines of *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, a woman's struggles with expression, rebellion and a society where power is defined as masculine.

#### ▶ Stanza 1

- ▶ The first stanza serves to explain what the tigers represent.
- ▶ Rich begins her poem with a beautiful picture, setting the scene for the dream world of Aunt Jennifer.
- ▶ We see that Aunt Jennifer has ownership over the tigers in some way (*Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* prance across a screen).
- ▶ They are free to prance across a screen.
- ▶ The tigers are bright like "Topaz" and they inhabit a world that is green.
- ▶ Aunt Jennifer's tigers do not fear men.
- ▶ They conduct themselves in a heroic, manly fashion.
- ▶ The tigers that Aunt Jennifer owns are confident and certain of what they are and what they want.

#### ▶ Stanza 2

- ▶ The second stanza reflects the physical and mental weakness of the aunt which is the consequence of her unhappy married life.
- ▶ Aunt Jennifer is so oppressed and so timid and terrified that she finds it difficult to pull the ivory



needle (which is light in weight) through the base cloth on which she is embroidering the tiger's image.

- She feels victimised and oppressed. It is clear from the reference of the "massive weight of uncle's wedding band". She is carrying the burden of her married life.

### ▶ Stanza 3

- This stanza talks about the tragic end of the aunt. Even death will fail to release her of the chains of her struggles which dominated her during her lifetime. The tigers remain undeterred. They remain indifferent to all the suppressions and ordeals. The poet makes it clear in her line "the tigers in the panel that she made will go on prancing, proud and unafraid."

### Theme

- The poem revolves around a single thought *i.e.*, male chauvinism. *Adrienne Rich* has quite successfully brought out the theme of the victimisation of the woman by her male counterpart. It throws light on the evils of patriarchy. Aunt Jennifer is tragically victimised and suffers the pangs of her married life while being tortured continuously by her husband. She finds it impossible to liberate herself from the clutches of tradition and law. Aunt Jennifer, who represents the female folk of society, creates for herself an alternate world of freedom in her art in which she can dwell only in her imagination.

- The symbolic meaning is that art is immortal but life is short-lived, transient—even though aunt is dead, her artistic tigers go on prancing.

### Literary Devices Used

In the poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' *Adrienne Rich* has made ample use of literary devices to stress upon the chauvinism of the male and the oppressions of the female at his hand.

- ▶ **Symbolism:** 'Tiger' has been used as a symbol of terror and arrogance perpetrated on women like the aunt by the male world. At the same time it symbolises a spirit of freedom and fearlessness which the aunt lacks, *viz.* "they are not afraid of the men beneath the tree."

- Massive weight of uncle's wedding band symbolises the atrocities that the aunt undergoes after her marriage.

- ▶ **Metaphor**

- Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
- Weight of uncle's wedding band.

- ▶ **Alliteration**

- Fingers fluttering through
- Weight of uncle's wedding band
- The panel that she made will go on prancing prroud and unafraid

- ▶ **Transferred Epithet**

- Her terrified hands.



## Practice Exercise



### Extract Based Questions

**Directions:** Read the extracts given below and answer the questions that follow:

1. Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,  
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green,  
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;  
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.  
Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool  
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.  
The massive weight of uncle's wedding band  
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand. (CBSE 2023)

- (a) Denizens of the world of green refer to .....  
(i) huntsmen (ii) Aunt Jennifer  
(iii) uncle (iv) tigers
- (b) Choose the option that displays the same poetic device as used in the second line of the extract.  
(i) Heart of stone (ii) Trees sprouting  
(iii) Silver spoon (iv) White murder
- (c) The men sitting beneath the tree are .....
- (d) What quality of uncle can be inferred through these lines?  
(i) Compassionate nature  
(ii) Courageous  
(iii) Confident  
(iv) Dominating

- (e) The tigers in the extract are symbolic of:

- (i) creativity and courage
- (ii) confidence and gentleness
- (iii) cruelty and fear
- (iv) aggression and starving

- (f) Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across:

- (I) the screen
- (II) the fields
- (III) the embroidered tunic
- (IV) the cage

Which of the following is the most appropriate choice?

- (i) (I) and (II) (ii) (II) and (IV)
- (iii) (I), (II) and (III) (iv) (I) and (III)

### Answers

- (a) (iv) tigers
- (b) (i) Heart of stone
- (c) the tired humans
- (d) (iv) Dominating
- (e) (i) creativity and courage
- (f) (i) (I) and (II)

2. Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool  
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.  
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band  
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

- (a) The name of the poem is .....
- (b) 'Fluttering' here means:  
 (i) moving nervously (ii) moving boldly  
 (iii) moving proudly (iv) moving rudely
- (c) What is the rhyme scheme of the stanza?  
 (i) abab (ii) aabc  
 (iii) aabb (iv) acbc
- (d) What is Aunt Jennifer doing?
- (e) Name the literary device used in "Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool".
- (f) State whether the given statement is True or False.  
 It seems that aunt has just got a precious gift.

## Answers

- (a) Aunt Jennifer's Tigers  
 (b) (i) moving nervously  
 (c) (iii) aabb  
 (d) Aunt Jennifer is embroidering or weaving.  
 (e) Alliteration.  
 (f) False



## Short Answer Type Questions

Q 1. How does 'chivalric' add to our understanding of the tiger's attitude?

Or

The tigers description as 'chivalric' is a contrast to that of Aunt Jennifer. Explain (CBSE 2022 Term-2)

Ans. 'Chivalric' means bold and gallant. Tigers have this quality. They are bold and gallant. Even the king of the forest, lion doesn't want to mess with the tigers.

Q 2. Why do you think Aunt Jennifer's hands are 'fluttering through her wool' in the second stanza?

Ans. Aunt Jennifer's hands are 'fluttering through her wool' because she feels the burden of her married life. She finds the needle so hard to pull because she has become weak through the ordeals of her life.

Q 3. What is suggested by the image 'massive weight of uncle's wedding band'?

Ans. Wedding band represents the unbreakable bond of marriage between the wife and the husband. But here the uncle, the husband of Aunt Jennifer has treated her harshly and callously. She experiences the heavy weight of family life.

Q 4. Of what or of whom is Aunt Jennifer terrified with in the third stanza?

Ans. Aunt Jennifer is terrified of her husband who is callous in his treatment with his wife.

Q 5. What are the 'ordeals' Aunt Jennifer is surrounded by?

Ans. Aunt Jennifer is surrounded by the ordeals of married life.

Q 6. Interpret the symbols found in this poem.

Ans. There are several symbols in the poem. The first symbol is tiger. It symbolises boldness, elegance and chivalry. Tiger is a sharp contrast to the Aunt Jennifer's own meek character. Another important

symbol is the ring. The wedding ring symbolises that the terrified hands of the Aunt are encircled with ordeals of married life even after her death.

Q 7. Do you sympathise with Aunt Jennifer? What is the attitude of the speaker towards Aunt Jennifer?

Ans. Yes, we do sympathise with Aunt Jennifer for her wretched married life where she experienced a lot of ordeals. The speaker has a sympathetic attitude towards Aunt Jennifer. The speaker's attitude is positive towards the aunt and the two symbols—tiger and ring—show her attitude towards Aunt Jennifer clearly.

Q 8. What ideology does the poem propound?

Ans. Obviously, the poem is a 'feminist' poem which condemns the male world for terrifying and oppressing the likes of 'Aunt Jennifer'. Her isolation and exploitation force her to create an alternate world of freedom in the world of her art.

Q 9. How is the poem a forceful expression of the evil of patriarchy?

Ans. The poem 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' brings to light the strifes and struggles of women at large for survival in a harsh male dominated world. All the deep conflicts of bondage and freedom with which the female counterpart wrestles, have been reduced to gender conflict here.

Q 10. How are genders polarised in the poem?

Ans. The genders in the poem are shown to be polarised as Aunt Jennifer is completely victimised. She feels the massive weight of her wedding band even in the absence of uncle. She feels to liberate herself of her mental and emotional suppression even though uncle is physically absent. The males like the uncle are brutally dominant.

Q 11. What does the wedding band symbolise here?

Ans. The wedding band symbolises the matrimony which by custom and law binds a woman in the grip of slavery. Since, marriage is a socially and legally binding on the women, they allow themselves to be dominated in this imposed relationship.

Q 12. What do 'tigers' symbolise in the poem?

Ans. 'Tigers' are symbolic of the terror of the male counterpart with which Aunt Jennifer suffers. She struggles for freedom but gets further victimised. She feels isolated in the male dominated world.

Q 13. What different feelings of Aunt Jennifer are revealed in the poem?

Ans. The three stanzas of the poem express different feelings of Aunt Jennifer as a victim of the male chauvinism. The first stanza expresses her fears, the second expresses her implied slavery and the third expresses, the struggles and ordeals of her spirit.

Q 14. Where does Aunt Jennifer seek refuge on being victimised by the male dominated world?

Ans. Unable to liberate herself from the clutches of male world, Aunt Jennifer tries to find the freedom of her spirit in her art.

Q 15. How might the message of the poem, 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' be different, if the following last four lines were omitted?

*When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
The tigers in the panel that she made  
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.*

(CBSE SQP 2023-24)

Ans. If the last four lines were omitted, the message of the poem would refer to the oppression and suffering of women, without any hope for liberation. By ending the poem with these four lines, the author achieves a sense of hope and transcendence. The image of the tigers continuing to prance, proud and unafraid, suggests that there is a way to transcend the oppression and suffering of women. Without these lines, the poem would end on a note of despair.



### Long Answer Type Questions

Q 1. Why do you think Aunt Jennifer created animals that are so different from her own character? What might the poet be suggesting, through this difference?

Ans. Aunt Jennifer had been meek and terrified in her married life while the tigers she created are bold, gallant, fearless, and have free spirit to walk here

and there in the forest. The creation of tigers is quite different from her character. The poet might be suggesting through this difference that a woman should not be timid and weak, terrified and tamed as to tolerate the inhuman behaviour of her husband.

Q 2. Do you view 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' as a tragic poem?

Ans. Yes, we view 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' as a tragic poem. A woman has to face the struggle of the spirit, injustice, and oppression after marriage in many societies of the world. This lends a tragic touch to the poem. But the tragedy here is mystified because we know neither what terrors Aunt Jennifer had to live with nor why her friends and relatives did not intervene to help her if she was so terrified.

Q 3. Does Aunt Jennifer succeed in finding a refuge in her art?

Ans. Oppressed by the overbearing dominance of Uncle Jennifer, Aunt Jennifer recoils into her make-believe world of dreams and art. She does find catharsis to her pent-up feelings and frustration. But sadly enough neither her art nor even her death could ever liberate her body and spirit from the terrors of the male dominated world around her ".....her terrified hands will lie—still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by".



## Chapter Test

### Extract Based Question

Q 1. When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie  
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.  
The tigers in the panel that she made  
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

(a) What is the rhyme scheme of the stanza?

- (i) abab (ii) aabb  
(iii) abcc (iv) abcd

(b) Terrified means:

- (i) excited (ii) scared  
(iii) indifferent (iv) eager

(c) Who is the poet?

(d) State whether the given statement is True or False.

The poet has used simile in the first line of the extract.

(e) Name the literary device used by the poet in 'her terrified hands'.

(f) The meaning of 'ordeal' is .....

### Short Answer Type Question

Q 2. What are the symbols in the poem? What do they symbolise?

### Long Answer Type Question

Q 3. 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers' is a tragic poem. Discuss.

